

If You Have To GUESS, It's Time To Quit

by Lt. Eugene Woodruff

With the first port visit of cruise over, everyone was ready to get back underway for one reason or another. We had the early afternoon brief, a “pinky” AIC 3 v 2, followed by a night trap on a 1+30 cycle.

Taxiing out, we went straight to cat 1, unusual for cyclic ops, so we all figured that cat 2 must be down. I ran it up, looked right—no, left—for cat 1, saluted and we were airborne. A smooth launch for having just pulled out of port. The rest of the flight went the same. Two runs, then to the tanker and on to marshal. The approach went smoothly, and the pass looked good too. I was thinking an OK 4-wire.

Taxiing was difficult, because the roll-out on the 4-wire is so close to the end of the angle. To make it worse, aircraft were parked all along cat 2, well aft of the JBD. The activity on cat 1 slowed things down, so we had to wait for a minute by elevator 1 for our spot to open. Eventually, we taxied forward again, but not to the normal locale. We were taxied right next to the nav pole, nose up to the catwalk.

“Valet parking,” I thought, as the blueshirts and plane captains began to run under the airplane. But they immediately ran back out, and the yellowshirt began making signals that I didn’t understand. I figured they were going to move one of the Hornets and then spin us into its spot. I was wrong. The flight-deck coordinator came over and signaled for us to shut down the right.

My mind raced. What was going on? Hot pump? Troubleshooting? I secured the right and was immediately told to secure the left. I was getting confused. I signaled for chocks and chains,

but instead, I got the tow-bar-connected signal. That was extremely unorthodox. “I guess they know what they are doing,” I said. ECMO 1 shut off his gear, and I got mine.

The backseater piped up, “Don’t forget to get the seats,” and we took care of that, too, before we lost ICS. Everyone was set, so I shut down the left and unstrapped.

I asked for the canopies to open, a must for Prowlers as this is a huge safety concern. The plane captain cleared the other side, and we got approval. As the canopies started coming up, the yellowshirt hustled over. “Close the canopies,” he signaled, so the plane captain cleared the opposite side and we complied.

“I guess we must be about to get some tailpipes on us,” the rightseater yelled. Next the yellowshirt gave me the off-brakes signal, typical for a push-back scenario.

I said, “I don’t like this, but I guess we are just getting pushed back into the street.”

Wrong again! We headed across the deck and into the landing area. I started to hand-pump the brakes, ensuring a full emergency-brake accumulator. “I really don’t like this,” I told the rightseater. We were being pushed through the wires backward, straight for the round down. All four of us would be trapped if something went sour. Sure enough, we were pushed all the way aft and cocked against the scupper, right in front of the round down. Finally chocked and chained, we opened the canopies and got out.

There were at least three problems with this whole situation. First, I couldn’t have ejected if

Photo by PHA Joseph Strevel
Photo modification by Allan Amen



something had gone wrong. We had all safed our seats and were unstrapped. Even if I had been able to eject, I couldn't have communicated with our backseaters, and I wouldn't have wanted to risk ejecting them while they were climbing out. Even if we could have ejected, we weren't even close to the required headwind as we traveled down the deck, with about zero relative wind.

Second, because the canopies were closed and open slowly, it would have taken at least four seconds for us to start climbing out once we realized we were going over the side. Jettisoning the canopies was out of the question as, again, this could injure or kill the backseaters if they were unprepared.

Finally, I had several chances to stop this charade before anyone's life was unnecessarily

risked. When we started guessing what was going on with our airplane, it was time to halt whatever was going on and get it straight. Section 5 of Chapter 6 in CV NATOPS clearly states, "All personnel except those necessary for the move are [to remain] well clear of the aircraft." The Prowler has only one set of brake pedals, which means one qualified brake rider; the three ECMOs can't help. The canopies are supposed to be open if there is no danger of high winds or risk of jet exhaust blowing on the canopy. The rider is supposed to be unstrapped, with helmet off and earplugs removed. We clearly had the motivation and the backing to stop the move, but we allowed confusion to guide our actions and did nothing. 🦅

Lt. Woodruff flies with VAQ-135.